

Ukraine's Law on Mobilisation Positive Effects and Remaining Dilemmas

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Figure 1. Poster displaying a recruitment advertisement of the Third Assault Brigade in Kharkiv, on 13 October 2024.

Source: TT (Photo by Sergey Bobok)

INTRODUCTION

From 2014 onwards, Ukraine has conducted mobilisation in response to Russia's aggression. According to Ukraine's Constitution, each citizen has the duty to defend the independence and territorial indivisibility of the Motherland,¹ but, in accordance with the law, only males do military service. At the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) grew rapidly thanks to the enlisting of volunteers and reservists. But as the war has developed, Ukraine has been struggling with manpower shortages.

These shortages have been blamed on several factors, including Ukrainians' fear of being insufficiently trained, bad leadership, pervasive corruption, institutional

weakness, inadequate legislation and Russia's malign influence.² Insufficient and belated support from partner countries has exacerbated the situation. Furthermore, mobilisation is expensive, especially for a country that is at war. The Ukrainian leadership has enacted a wide range of measures to rectify this situation, one of which was a reform of the mobilisation law in April 2024. Balancing the dire need of soldiers with the principles of a democratic state is a complex task.

This memo investigates the key elements of this law. It also analyses how the law has impacted the conditions for mobilisation and how, together with additional government measures, it shapes the outlook for mobilisation in 2025. Since the focus of this investigation lies

at the intersection of government legislation and public response, it draws on both official state documents, statements by government representatives, surveys, newspaper articles, and other media reports, as well as academic research. The analysis covers the period from December 2023, with the discussions on the need for a new law on mobilisation, to December 2024.

THE LACK OF SOLDIERS AND DRAFTING A NEW LAW

In December 2023, President Zelenskyi stated that Ukraine's military leadership had urged the government to mobilise another 450,000–500,000 conscripts. This was quickly denied by Commander-in-chief at the time Valerii Zaluzhnyi at a press conference in Kyiv the same month. Zaluzhnyi confirmed the need for more soldiers but stated that he could not and would not define exactly how many. The choice to mobilise was ultimately a government decision. However, he stressed the importance of adequate training, stating that mobilisation should therefore be carried out in stages.³ Essentially, there is nothing new with this approach.

Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, general mobilisation under martial law has been in effect, but not all eligible men have been drafted. In his December 2023 press conference, Zaluzhnyi stated that, thanks to the support from international partners, Ukraine could at that point train up to 10 new brigades. However, he emphasised that the total number of new conscripts required would depend on the length of service; the shorter the term, the more men would be needed. A lack of weapons and ammunition also impacted the scope of mobilisation. Zaluzhnyi, furthermore, acknowledged the importance of rest for fighting soldiers but concluded that large-scale personnel rotations were nearly impossible in a combat situation. In summary, the press conference highlighted both the urgent need for more soldiers and the complexity of achieving such an enterprise.

Under martial law, men are called up to fight in a two-stage process. The first stage is to be drafted into the military to acquire basic military training; the second is to be called up to fight. Yet before the new law was adopted, only men who were 27 or older could be drafted. This was not a problem during the initial stages of the full-scale invasion, as a large number of individuals enlisted. To this day, both men and women can volunteer for military service starting at age 18. The problem of a troop shortage became acute only in

2023, after the long-awaited but underequipped Ukrainian counteroffensive. Ukraine's failure to hit back and reclaim occupied territories led to a decline in enthusiasm and a waning sense of duty to join the AFU. This in turn affected the conditions of the recruitment officers. Although men eligible for military service were meant to be mobilised, many were difficult to contact. They were either dodging recruitment officers, or their contact information was outdated or unavailable. The measures to resolve the situation needed to address not only the questions of how to get in contact with men eligible for military service, but also how to mobilise.

A first draft of the mobilisation bill (No. 10378) was introduced in late December 2023. Among other things, it proposed that local self-government bodies would be responsible for summoning citizens, introduced the possibility of sending summonses digitally, and restricted the right to defer military service for some individuals with disabilities. The bill quickly came under heavy criticism: Ukraine's human rights ombudsman, Dmytro Lubinets, accused it of violating human rights and being unconstitutional, while others pointed out that it increased the risk of corruption.⁴ Due to this controversy, a new bill (No. 10449) was registered on 30 January 2024. Although over 4000 amendments to the bill were submitted to the Verkhovna Rada Committee on National Security, Defence, and Intelligence for consideration, the draft text was approved with approximately 30 changes by the Committee on 9 April. Prioritising a speedy process, the Verkhovna Rada approved the bill in its second reading on 11 April. President Zelenskyi signed it into law on 16 April, and it entered into force on 18 May as Law No. 3633-IX.

In April and May, three supplemental laws entered into force.⁵ One law (No. 3127-IX) lowered the conscription age from 27 to 25,⁶ another law (No. 3549-IX) launched a unified online register for conscripts, Oberih, and a third law (No. 3621-IX) cancelled the category of "partially eligible," thus leaving only two categories, "eligible" and "ineligible" for conscription.⁷

Western partners have questioned why Ukraine does not introduce mobilisation of 18–25-year-olds. Nonetheless, Minister of Defence Rustem Umerov has rejected the rumours that partners have been pressuring the Ukrainian leadership to mobilise younger men. For Ukraine, these men are needed not only as soldiers but also as part of a competent and resilient workforce to keep the economy going. Yet even if Ukraine

were to lower the conscription age, it is questionable whether that would make any significant difference in the ranks. To begin, due to low birth rates and high emigration in the 1990s and 2000s, Ukraine faces a demographic problem; there are far fewer people currently in their 20s, compared to those in their 30s and 40s.⁸ These numbers contrast sharply with the rather large age cohorts of the late Soviet era. Moreover, a recent report states that the mortality rate in Ukraine in 2024 is three times higher than the birth-rate.⁹ This crisis has fostered an understanding among Ukrainians that the younger generations of reproductive age must be spared from military service to prevent a demographic disaster. They are the future of Ukraine and their efforts will be needed in the reconstruction work that lies ahead. Throughout the autumn, President Zelenskyi has continuously communicated this standpoint to Ukraine's international partners.

THE LAW ON MOBILISATION (No. 3633-IX)

The new law on mobilisation comprises a set of measures targeted at making mobilisation more efficient and more transparent. It balances between meeting the needs of the AFU and protecting the rights of civilians. The overarching purpose of the law is to regulate military registration and mobilisation procedures, as well as basic military training. It also defines the principles of personnel selection, including regulations on deferment. The law lists consequences for those who do not comply with the law, as well as a set of benefits for those who do. These are its key points:

Military registration

- All men liable for military service, conscripts, and reservists between the ages of 18 and 60 must update their personal data in the military register by appearing at either a Territorial Recruitment Centre (TRC), an Administrative Service Centre (ASC), or via the electronic cabinet, "Rezerv+," for persons liable for military service within 60 days from the date the law enters into force. The required data includes their phone number and current residential address.
- The rules also apply to Ukrainian citizens who have left the country for more than three months, resulting in the authorities removing their data from the register. Military-age men are required to carry their

military registration documents and identity documents at all times.

Enforcement and summonses

- Men who have been drafted can receive a summons. During mobilisation, the procedure for conscription for military service is carried out by the TRC in collaboration with the local state administration, local self-government bodies, enterprises, institutions, organisations (regardless of subordination and form of ownership), and military and police authorities. Summonses can be handed out in person or sent by post.¹⁰
- The exact information to be specified in the summons will have already been determined in order to avoid ambiguities.
- Valid reasons for not responding to the summons include illness, hostilities, or any respective results that make it impossible for a person to appear at a certain time and place, and/or the death of a close family member.
- A medical examination is mandatory for all persons liable for military service.
- Persons who earlier were defined as "partially eligible" for military service need to undergo a new medical examination.

Training for Military Service

- From 1 September 2025, men between 18 and 25 will undergo mandatory basic military training instead of conscription. In peacetime, the basic training is up to three months, plus up to two months of specialist training; in wartime, the basic training is no less than one month, plus up to two months of specialist training. The basic military training will be incorporated into education conducted at universities (regardless of ownership).

Deferment from military service

- Specified groups are excluded from military service during mobilisation. These include parents with three or more children under the age of 18 and single parents who are independently raising one or more children.

- Certain professions, such as higher education teaching staff and government and state officials, are excluded from military service, as are military personnel who have been released from captivity and have been required to quit the Armed Forces.
- Certain diseases, conditions, and disabilities also effect military service eligibility. The right to defer military service needs to be reconfirmed annually.
- It is no longer possible to defer from military service during mobilisation by enrolling in an educational institution.

Measures on evasion of duty

- Penalties for evading service include revocation of drivers' licenses during mobilisation and suspension of consular services abroad, including passport renewals.

Motivation

- Guaranteed annual basic leave, monetary compensation, and benefits with bank credits are provided as incentives for men who enlist.¹¹

It is worth noting that the law does not address the topic of demobilisation, which has been a central question ever since the full-scale invasion began. In the process of updating the legislation, critics feared that men would avoid being drafted if there was no end to their potential term of service, and enlistment was perceived as a “one-way ticket to the front.” An earlier draft of the bill proposed limiting the terms for military service to 36 months. However, this clause was deleted following appeals from Ukraine’s military leadership, who feared losing men with combat experience.¹²

Currently, soldiers are not allowed to leave the army legally until demobilisation is introduced by the government, a process that has already dragged on for months. Although the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence (MoD) is preparing a bill outlining the conditions for demobilisation during martial law, there is still no prognosis on when a law on demobilisation is coming. This poses a dilemma for the AFU, since the uncertainty over the terms of service makes recruitment unappealing for many.

ADDITIONAL MEASURES

Since 2019, a digitalisation reform has been conducted in Ukraine. The aim of this process is to make all public services accessible online. Russia’s full-scale invasion has not stopped this progress. As a tool for military registration, the Ukrainian MoD uses the unified electronic register, Oberih, of people liable for military service, which was launched on 28 March 2022 and finalised with the support of the European Union (EU) within the project EU4DigitalUA. In order to make it easier for citizens to register for military service, the Ukrainian MoD has created a supplementary electronic cabinet, the application Rezerv+, intended for civilians who are on the military register. Similarly, there is another state application, “Armii+,” launched on 8 August 2024, aimed at military personnel. Registration is also possible through an electronic queue for the TRC, accessible via the website of the Ukrainian MoD. However, the government has announced that summonses will not be distributed electronically, only on paper, since there is no law that forces Ukrainians to use applications or e-mail.

Some citizens in Ukraine and abroad have not, for different reasons, updated their personal data in the military register in accordance with the new law or are dodging military service in other ways. On 17 May 2024, President Zelenskyi signed a law that included raising fines for violations of the legislation on defence, mobilisation, and military registration. For failing to update their personal data, Ukrainians liable for military service may be fined from UAH 8500 up to UAH 59,500. In some cases, a person can even face imprisonment for three to five years for draft evasion, according to Article 336 in the Criminal Code.¹³

During the autumn, the Ukrainian authorities have worked to improve the prerequisites for the AFU and the conditions for mobilisation by revising the legal framework. The continuous preparation of new bills and propositions to complete the law on mobilisation demonstrates that the legislative work on mobilisation is very much still in progress. In November, for instance, the mobilisation rules for certain citizens who had suffered due to Russian aggression were changed, and in October, the General Staff announced that a proposition on the establishment of Cyber Forces as a separate branch of the Armed Forces was being discussed.¹⁴ In relation to the amendments to the mobilisation law,

President Zelenskyi has also signed a law that permits foreigners to serve as officers in the International Legion.

KEY EFFECTS OF THE LAW

Half a year after the new law entered into force, some effects on the conditions for mobilisation are discernible. Due to the limitations of its format, this memo primarily focuses on four key effects of the new law and how, together with complementing government measures, they shape the outlook for mobilisation in 2025.

A new wave of potential soldiers

According to Roman Kostenko, Secretary of the Parliamentary Committee on National Security, Defence, and Intelligence, Ukraine saw a huge upswing in mobilisation in May 2024. He pointed out the mobilisation law as a key enabler for this.¹⁵ In late May, President Zelenskyi concluded that the new law had indeed bolstered mobilisation.¹⁶ By 17 July, 60 days after the new law came into force, almost 4.7 million Ukrainian citizens liable for military service had updated their personal data in the military register, according to the Ukrainian MoD. Of these, more than 3 million had registered through the application Rezerv+.¹⁷ Several new recruitment centres were opened during the spring to support this mobilisation boost.

The fact that there is no communicated goal for the number of conscripted citizens expected as a result of the new law enables its “effectiveness” to be assessed rather freely. According to an estimation in mid-March 2024, 3.7 million Ukrainian men between the ages of 25 and 60 were eligible for mobilisation. The remaining men were either already fighting, disabled, abroad, or classified as critical workers.¹⁸ In light of this estimation, the number of updated and new registrations in Rezerv+ is an important step forward, albeit some of them were made by citizens already in active service.

The mobilisation boost led to an influx of men who received military training in the following months. In a mid-October interview with Fox News Digital, Minister of Defence Rustem Umerov claimed that mobilisation indicators had increased by 2.5 times since the adoption of the law, and twelve percent of military personnel now voluntarily join the ranks thanks to the new recruitment system.¹⁹ In contrast, the General Staff of the AFU did not share that positive outlook on the situation. Vasyl Rumak, head of the Training Department at the General Staff, said at a briefing in October that

although over 20,000 men were being trained at the moment, this number had dropped significantly since a few months back.²⁰

The Verkhovna Rada Committee on Law Enforcement concluded in October that more than 6 million citizens liable for military service had not updated their personal data as required by the new law. To improve these figures, the Committee is currently preparing a project addressing draft evaders that proposes a 50 percent discount of the fixed fines upon voluntary recognition of a violation of the law.²¹ Hopes are high that draft dodgers will prefer a lower fine and enlistment over a prison sentence.

An obstacle to smooth mobilisation is that the citizens most willing to defend their country with arms have already done so, and many of them are now injured or dead. The decrease in the potential human capital poses a growing problem for Ukraine’s government officials responsible for mobilisation. Simply stated, men who are reluctant to fight make bad soldiers. The situation is difficult to change, since many men who shun adverse odds fear they will only get worse. Back in April 2024, General Iurii Sodol stated that Russians outnumbered Ukrainians by more than seven to one;²² by September, Ukrainian commanders estimated that in certain sections of the front, there were up to ten Russian soldiers for each Ukrainian.²³ With Russia’s decision to use North Korean proxies to bolster their army, the disparity may be even more disadvantageous for Ukraine.

Ensuring conscripts receive decent training plays a pivotal role in bolstering confidence in the military capabilities of the AFU on a general as well as an individual level. Thanks to the international support of organisations such as the EU Military Assistance Mission (EUMAM-UA), the United States Security Assistance Group—Ukraine (SAG-U), and the UK’s Operation Interflex, more than 100,000 Ukrainians have received military training abroad since the start of the full-scale invasion.²⁴ However, not all Ukrainian conscripts can receive training abroad. The legislative work has primarily focused on improving the conditions for combat training. To meet the widespread fear of insufficient military training, the General Staff of the AFU announced at a briefing on 19 October 2024 that the duration of basic military training would be extended from 30 to 45 days, starting 1 November.²⁵

Since the law entered into force, Ukrainian and international stakeholders have received

recommendations from both analysts and sociological institutes on how to streamline mobilisation in Ukraine even further. One issue highlighted in a recent qualitative study on Ukrainians' concerns and hopes about military service, conducted in July 2024, was the shared opinion of soldiers and civilians that the AFU could do more to effectively allocate people with specialised skills to the appropriate unit. Therefore, the study's contributors suggested that expanding the options to select roles and units could potentially motivate men to join the army.²⁶

During the autumn, the application Rezerv+ was updated to address this point. In October, the Ukrainian MoD launched a new recruiting service within the application, allowing users to choose combat and non-combat positions that best match their experience, skills, and preferences. The service offers information on vacancies, sub-subunits and their achievements, and command. In the first two weeks, the recruiting service in Rezerv+ received more than 5000 applications.²⁷ Concurrently, a similar recruiting service was launched in the state's application, Diia, allowing users to join special UAV sub-subunits of their choice. Innovations like these make the process of joining the AFU resemble applying for a civilian job, directly and without the need to visit a TRC. This approach could potentially encourage citizens to enlist since they are offered a choice on where they are going and what they will do once they get there. As has been pointed out, brigades running their own recruitment, such as the Third Separate Assault Brigade, and Da Vinci Wolves, prove more popular compared to the regular TRC in part because they offer people a choice, which enhances the feeling of control.²⁸

Another positive development is the increasing amount of online educational series and webinars available on the state's digital portal, Diia, through which both military and civilian citizens can obtain information on a range of topics, such as the safety rules that apply during military operations, mine safety, psychological and legal assistance during martial law, and information about bomb shelters. These developments are important signals both to the Ukrainian public as well as to international partners that the AFU adheres to criticism and seeks to improve the training conditions for conscripts and make enlistment more appealing altogether.

Continued public discontent and corruption

Despite the positive outcome that the AFU now has several million potential soldiers, there is still public discontent with the conditions concerning mobilisation and the situation for soldiers currently in service. Crucially, the question of when and how demobilisation will be carried out remains unanswered. According to the study on attitudes towards military service mentioned above, the top concerns of respondents were the risk of disability or death, the lack of adequate training, insufficient military equipment, and fear of indefinite service terms.²⁹ With the third year of the war soon coming to an end, many of these concerns remain. The issue of demobilisation came under heated discussion again in September when a Ukrainian soldier and activist deserted and publicly announced it on social media and news outlets to draw attention to the need for rotating worn-out soldiers.³⁰ This action highlighted the severity of the situation, which made some people praise and others condemn the soldier.

The new law stipulates that upon request of the authorities men must be able to show their military registration documents at any place and time. Recruitment officials have been using this to track down individuals who have been avoiding the register. In mid-October, military commissars were conducting large-scale raids all over Ukraine, for example, outside shopping centres and concert halls. As a result, tickets to subsequent concerts began appearing for resale online,³¹ suggesting that anxious citizens liable for military service were rethinking attending public events where they might encounter the local TRC. It seems unlikely that violently forcing men would improve the enlistment numbers or make recruitment more popular among draft dodgers. Indeed, public discontent towards the mobilisation law is at its strongest among men who desert or dodge mobilisation, which poses a huge problem for the AFU. But draft dodging is not only a problem for the army. As current research shows, some draft dodgers are going underground because of stigmatisation by Ukrainian state actors, which in the future may deter those who have left the country from returning to participate in the country's rebuilding process.³²

The new law's broadening of recruitment officers' authority also risks creating novel ways of practicing corruption. Corruption undermines Ukraine's resilience even further, and it concerns both "ordinary"

citizens and state officials. According to a Kharkiv blogger, some men have paid bribes of up to USD 5000 to enlistment officers in order to avoid conscription.³³ A larger corruption scandal was unveiled in October 2024, when hundreds of officials, including prosecutors, were accused of obtaining false disability certificates. As a result, Prosecutor General Andriy Kostin resigned and President Zelenskyi ordered all of the medical commissions performing medical checks to be closed by the end of the year.³⁴ Consequently, numerous individual cases concerning disability certificates will have to be re-examined to rule out irregularities. Besides eroding public confidence in the government, corruption effectively increases the burden on Ukrainian law enforcement agencies and public finances.

Increasing economic and administrative pressure on government authorities

Increasing costs for the government are an unavoidable consequence of the new law. In early November, the cost of training a single soldier ranged from UAH 200,000 to 300,000, depending on additional training for special skills,³⁵ while simultaneously leading to a loss of tax revenues. The new law furthermore entails that men who were previously recognised as “partially eligible” for military service undergo second military examinations. Additionally, men who are hiding from authorities out of fear of being drafted are also costing the government money. According to Hlib Vyshlinskyi, head of the Kyiv-based Centre for Economic Strategy, the new law has made many men fear being on a company payroll, since businesses are responsible for reporting the military status of their employees.³⁶ Citizens who quit their jobs for this reason are a loss both to the employer, the state, and the AFU.

Moreover, the new law on mobilisation has resulted in massive challenges for Ukrainian law enforcement agencies due to the legal proceedings that have been initiated towards draft dodgers and deserters. One citizen has challenged the Ukrainian mobilisation legislation with the assertion that his religious beliefs hinder him from fulfilling his military duty towards his Motherland. He claims the constitutional right to replace military duty with non-military service, and his case is now being processed in the Constitutional Court.³⁷ This case is important since the verdict could become indicative as to whether citizens of Ukraine have the right to replace military

duty with nonmilitary service even during martial law, and thereby open a legal way to avoid military service. In the end of 2023, the Ukrainian Pacifist Movement reported that the alternatives for men who want to serve their country but do not wish to join the AFU were very limited.³⁸

Intensified Russian malign influence and propaganda

The lengthy process and intense discontent with the new law on mobilisation were low-hanging fruit for Russia; it could use the situation to discredit both the Ukrainian leadership and the Armed Forces. According to political scientist Sofie Rose, legal proceedings against draft dodgers foster a criminalising discourse, labeling men who do not want to fight as criminals, thereby risking increased tensions within Ukrainian society. Moreover, numerous videos provide evidence that draft dodgers are being harassed and treated harshly by authorities, and that these videos are being used by Russia for propaganda purposes.³⁹

In the aftermath of the mobilisation law, “reports” about the situation on mobilisation in Ukraine have stated, for instance, that Washington might want to pressure Ukraine to lower the conscription age to 14 due to the AFU’s lack of manpower.⁴⁰ Such stories are likely aimed at serving three purposes: first, convincing Russians that Ukraine is struggling with troop shortages and is entirely in the hands of its Western partners; second, making Ukrainians doubt their government and Armed Forces; and third, encouraging international partners to question the sense of supplying the AFU with arms if they sense a risk that there are not enough Ukrainian soldiers willing to use them.

CONCLUSIONS

This memo investigates the key elements of the new law and how, together with additional government measures, it shapes the conditions for mobilisation in 2025. The analysis concludes that the law has not solved all mobilisation issues. Ukraine still faces major challenges with troop shortages. Nevertheless, some positive effects can be discerned.

The new law, together with additional measures, has made mobilisation more transparent and effective. These measures have helped to clarify who is affected by mobilisation and what their duties are. There is also evidence that Ukraine is learning from its setbacks with

mobilisation. A general trend in this development is that not only legislation but also the practical effort of getting people to enlist have started focusing more on motivation and less on intimidation. Offering possibilities to acquire better training and choose where to serve has proven successful, while violently hunting for possible recruits has had the opposite effect.

Moreover, the measures taken show steadfastness in the government apparatus, which despite setbacks and the increasingly difficult conditions of martial law continues to endorse democratic principles and procedures and fight corruption. Although the bureaucratic processes are slow, as in any modern democracy, there are many signs that Ukraine is developing in a more democratic and transparent direction. This conclusion appears to contradict Ukraine's reputation of institutional weakness. In the long term, this development is

likely to enhance Ukraine's mobilisation capabilities, making them more robust and predictable.

While evaluating Ukraine's mobilisation efforts, it is also worth remembering that Russia is struggling with troop shortage as well.⁴¹ However, this issue is not as prominently voiced as Ukraine's challenges, which may create a distorted perception of the balance of military strength between the two countries. While Russia's army is greater in numbers, Ukraine must strive for quality, with highly motivated, competent, and well-equipped soldiers. Since the will to fight is intimately connected to the conditions of service in the AFU, finding a way forward is a responsibility that must be shared by Ukraine and its allies. Even with significantly improved mobilisation in 2025, Ukraine's chances of winning the war remain slim without continued financial support and munitions provided by international partners. ■

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